

# BLUEGRASS BUGLE

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The U.S.-Russia  
Bilateral Presidential  
Commission  
introduces a new  
American word – and  
a new musical form –  
to NW Russia.

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(July 27, 2010): *Fine Street* has agreed to play at the U.S. Consul General's Residence on August 25! To launch the Consul General's annual Press Grill for local journalists, St. Petersburg's finest country-bluegrass band will put their collective talent to work providing live musical accompaniment for Buster Keaton's classic short film *One Week* (1920) which was added to the U.S. National Film Registry by the Library of Congress in 2008.





After calling *Fine Street* and *Cheerful Diligence* to join him up on stage at Vologda's Kremlin Courtyard for the final jam, Dr. Banjo gets the overflow audience ready to sing-along to the classic, "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms."



St. Sophia's Cathedral in Vologda

## WHY VOLOGDA?

Location, location, location. Almost equidistant from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Arkhangelsk and located on a major railroad hub, it's no wonder that U.S. Ambassador David Francis chose Vologda as the place to stage the U.S. Mission to Russia in 1918-1919 after his staff evacuated from Petrograd in the wake of the Russian Revolution. It also doesn't hurt that the ancient Russian city of Vologda (first mentioned in 1147) has much older ties to the North American continent as merchants from the region played a key role in developing both Russian Alaska and Russian California. Today, Vologda (pop. 300,000) lays claim to the title of "The Cultural Capital of Northern Russia."

## BLUEGRASS TAKES ROOT IN VOLOGDA ...

(July 20, 2010): U.S. Consul General Sheila Gwaltney and Vologda's First Deputy Governor Ivan Pozdnyakov kicked off the opening night of the first-ever Russian Bluegrass Festival headlined by Colorado's own *Dr. Banjo* at the stunning Kremlin Courtyard. Before turning the show over to *Dr. Banjo*, Ms. Gwaltney and Mr. Pozdnyakov reminded the 600+ members of the overflow audience of the many connections which unite the U.S. and

Russia. As *Dr. Banjo's* fiddler pointed out at the end of the night, very few music festivals outgrow their venues on their first try. Hooked on bluegrass, the Vologda Regional Administration has already offered the U.S. Mission their huge Kremlin Square if we return with a second festival next year.

## ... AND THEN SPREADS ACROSS NW RUSSIA

(July 22, 2010): The day's twin bluegrass concerts began when U.S. Consul General Sheila Gwaltney hosted a special event for St. Petersburg journalists and musicians at her residence. After the reception which followed, everyone was off to the jam-packed Jazz Fusion Club where St. Petersburg's own country-bluegrass band *Fine Street* opened for *Dr. Banjo*. Putting together everything that they had learned during Pete Wernick's master classes in Vologda — as well as informal practice sessions on the overnight train, *Fine Street* joined *Dr. Banjo* up on stage for the final numbers at the end of both concerts, thereby transforming the goals of the Bilateral Presidential Commission into reality by creating Russian-American musical harmony which had everyone stomping their feet and clapping their hands.



Pete Wernick is "Dr. Banjo."

## WANNA HELP SPREAD BLUEGRASS ACROSS RUSSIA?

Contact Eric A. Johnson at [johnsoea\(at\)state.gov](mailto:johnsoea(at)state.gov) for more information.

Tune in @ [youtube.com/user/usconsulatespb](https://www.youtube.com/user/usconsulatespb)

## BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL GENERATES NEWS STORM

(July 23, 2010): With the help of several advance articles written by St. Petersburg Consulate staff explaining this native American musical form and setting the right tone, the first-ever Russian Bluegrass Festival and its related events received substantial coverage from such media markets as: national TV5 and VOA Radio; Vologda's TV 7, *Vesti-Rossiya* TV, REN TV, Premiere Radio, plus newspapers *Krasny Sever* and *Premiere*; St. Petersburg's TV100, youth-oriented VTR TV, *Radio Peterburg*, *Ekho Peterburga*, as well as newspapers *Sankt-Petersburgskie Vedomosti* and *Nevskoe Vremya* – most of whom got a chance to interview *Dr. Banjo* and their fellow Russian musicians as well as U.S. Consulate staff. Dozens of regional websites, news portals, and social media sites also featured the week's bluegrass events. And the first Russian Bluegrass Festival continues playing sweet music for all to hear on the U.S. Consulate's YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/user/usconsulatespb](http://www.youtube.com/user/usconsulatespb).



Cheerful Diligence makes everyone in Semyonkova happy.

## THE RUSSIAN HILLS COME ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF AMERICAN BLUEGRASS

(July 21, 2010). On its second day, the Russian Bluegrass Festival moved out to Vologda's beautiful open air museum of Semyonkova in the heart of "Russia's Dairyland" where another overflow crowd – including a hundred elite students from a nearby United Russia summer camp – braved the afternoon heat to listen to

America's *Dr. Banjo* supported by two of Russia's homegrown country-bluegrass bands: St. Petersburg's impressive *Fine Street* and Obninsk's crowd-pleasing *Cheerful Diligence* whose members range in age from 9 to 15. Thanks to the help of its Russian partners at the Vologda Regional Administration and the Vologda Historical Museum, the U.S. Mission had no problem planting bluegrass seeds across NW Russia.

## CITY SLICKERS TUNE IN TO ROCKY MOUNTAIN BLUEGRASS

(July 22, 2010): The sound of bluegrass filled St. Petersburg's airwaves when *Dr. Banjo* (Pete Wernick along with guitarist-wife Joan Wernick and fiddler-friend Justin Hoffenberg) played live on *Radio Peterburg* – Russia's oldest radio station with an estimated 600,000 listeners – while St. Petersburg's Public Affairs Officer (PAO) explained this native American musical form to a lunch-time audience in fluent Russian. During the same prime mid-day slot, independent radio station *Ekho Peterburg* (ca. 2 million listeners) aired its pre-recorded interview with the PAO about bluegrass, featuring several songs by *Dr. Banjo*. And that was just a sample of our bluegrass charm offensive with the Russian media.

## ADOPT A RUSSIAN BLUEGRASS BAND!

(July 27, 2010): In order to keep the spirit of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission's first Russian Bluegrass Festival alive and well, the U.S. Consulate decided to adopt *Cheerful Diligence*, Russia's newest country-bluegrass band. The "adoption" will get underway in September when the young Obninsk sextet starts taking special classes in "American English for Russian Bluegrass Musicians" paid for by U.S. Consulate staff. If you want to help, please let us know.



Going live on-the-air on Russia's oldest radio station, *Dr. Banjo* introduces St. Petersburg's listeners to "Scruggs-style" three-fingered banjo playing which became bluegrass' defining sound after being introduced by Earl Scruggs in 1945.



Cheerful Diligence's Liza picks away on her all-American banjo.



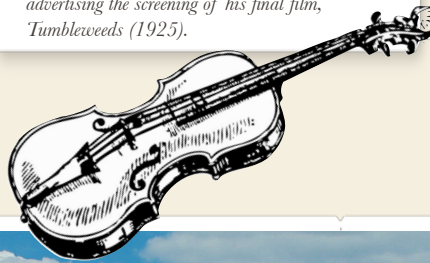
## CLINT EASTWOOD HEADS FOR THE HILLS

AFTER WILLIAM HART SHOWS ST. PETERSBURG HE'S THE TOUGHEST  
HOMBRE IN THE WEST

(July 23, 2010): The U.S. Consulate General in St. Petersburg staked out virgin territory by bringing together two different U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission projects on one stage when it combined its ongoing *Silent Film + Live Music* festival celebrating Hollywood's 100th anniversary with sounds from the first-ever Russian Bluegrass Festival. As a result, St. Petersburg's historic Rodina Movie Theater showed William S. Hart's 1925 masterpiece *Tumbleweeds* to the lonesome twang of *Dr. Banjo*. After watching the greatest cowboy film of the silent era, everyone understood where Clint Eastwood "borrowed" the inspiration for both his "Good Bad Man" and the "Silent Stranger" (Eastwood's cowboy says so few words he might as well be playing



William S. Hart shows everyone why "he's the man" on the Rodina Movie Theater's posters advertising the screening of his final film, *Tumbleweeds* (1925).



in a silent movie). Over 300 wannabe cow-pokes delayed heading out to the country on a hot Friday night to watch William Hart strut his stuff and listen to *Dr. Banjo*'s three-fingered picks, licks, and rolls.

## WHO IS THE MYSTERIOUS DR. BANJO?

Well, if you're asking that question, then you're probably new to bluegrass. Ever since taking part in America's first bluegrass festival in 1965, Peter Wernick (*Dr. Banjo*) has been picking the strings of America's most famous instrument – often in the company of his wife, Joan Wernick (*Nurse Banjo*). Colorado fiddler Justin Hoffenberg and St. Petersburg-based U.S. expat Robert Palomo (bringing *Dr. Banjo* to Russia was his idea) rounded off the all-American entry at this Russian Bluegrass Festival. To learn more about bluegrass musician and educator *Dr.*

*Banjo*, you can check out his website ([www.drbanjo.com](http://www.drbanjo.com)) – and don't forget to follow the link to watch him playing "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" on *The Late Show with David Letterman* together with comedian Steve Martin, Earl Scruggs (the Father of the Bluegrass Banjo), and other musicians.



Dr. and Nurse Banjo perform in Semyonkova with Justin Hoffenberg on fiddle and Robert Palomo on bass.



## Where the Grass is Blue not Green

*This piece appeared in a Vologda newspaper before the first Russian Bluegrass Festival.*

If you were asked to name different types of music which originated in America, you'd probably come up with jazz, blues, and – of course – rock and roll. These three musical forms were born in African-American communities along the banks of a river which runs mostly brown rather than blue: the mighty Mississippi. Known affectionately as the “Big Muddy,” the Great River (*Misi-zübi* in the Ojibwe Indian language) is the cradle of most modern American musical forms and its many urban descendents such as pop, funk, soul, disco, punk, rap, and hip-hop. And although the 3,730 kilometer Mississippi has long served as America's musical melting place where African, European, Latin, Caribbean, and Native American musical traditions fused to create the world's most popular sounds, the mysterious Big Muddy has still not revealed all of its musical secrets to outsiders. Deep in the bayous of the Mississippi Delta you can hear the sounds of Cajun and zydeco music – music which most people have yet to discover.

While the music of the Mississippi is truly mighty, America is a continent vast enough to contain even more native musical forms. Travelling to the plains both east and west of the Mississippi, you will encounter the only other music that can still rival rock-and-roll for dominance of America's airwaves and audiences: country music. Country music's capital city is Nashville, right in the middle of the state of Tennessee. Just to give you a small idea of its influence, Garth Brooks – country music's top star – is the best selling U.S. musician of all time. But in order to find the heart of bluegrass country, you will need to travel a little further north to the state of Kentucky and a little further east into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

Not as well known as the towering, magnificent, and relatively young (geologically speaking, of course) Rocky Mountains which run north-south far west of the Mississippi, the much older and more sedate Appalachian Mountains run in the same general north-south direction to the east of the Mississippi not too far inland from the Atlantic coast. These

ancient mountains go by so many different names that even most Americans forget that they make up a single mountain chain. New Yorkers know them as the Catskill Mountains, Pennsylvanians know them as the Poconos, while people in Ohio and West Virginia sometimes call them the Alleghenies. Americans even seem to disagree on their color: Vermonters call them the Green Mountains while those from New Hampshire see them as the White Mountains. When I lived near Virginia, I got to know them as the Blue Ridge Mountains – and, yes, when seen from a distance they really do look blue so I have no idea what those folk in New England are talking about.

On the Mississippi side of these same Blue Ridge Mountains, you will find the hills of West Virginia and Kentucky, famous for their moonshine (corn whiskey) as well as bluegrass – a type of meadow grass (*genus: poa*) which actually looks blue in the right light. And even though my roots are from the long-time rival state of Tennessee just to the south (Kentucky and Tennessee loyalists still get into heated arguments as to who makes the only “real” American whiskey), I will confess to a certain fondness for the Bluegrass State (as Kentucky is widely known) and the musical form named after it: bluegrass.

Although bluegrass music only came together after World War II, it combines elements from much older American musical streams such as country, jazz (especially Dixieland and ragtime), as well as blues. And like its country music parent, its roots can be traced right back to Europe to traditional Anglo-Celtic music which formed the basis of America's first folk music. But because bluegrass is a relatively modern variation of American “folk” music, it's even possible to trace its origins back to a single man, a Kentuckian named Bill Monroe and his band the Blue Grass Boys which started playing their unique brand of music in 1939. As the “Father of Bluegrass” once described his own child: “It's blues and jazz, and it has a high lonesome sound. It's plain music that tells a good story. It's played from my heart to your heart, and it

will touch you. Bluegrass is music that matters.”

Residents of Vologda will get a chance to hear this other American “music that matters” on July 20 when bluegrass virtuoso *Dr. Banjo* plus his U.S. trio – playing the other essential instruments of fiddle, guitar, and bass – come to town. Although *Dr. Banjo* (born Peter Wernick) now lives in Colorado – an upstart Rocky Mountain state, his musical heart lies somewhere closer to Appalachia. In the same way that he has amazed American audiences both from the stage and on TV with his skills, *Dr. Banjo* (who acquired his nicknamed thanks to his Ph.D. in sociology) will show interested Russians just how the native American instrument known as the banjo provided bluegrass with its fundamental sound ever since a legendary banjo player named Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in 1945. A former president of the International Bluegrass Music Association, *Dr. Banjo* will share the Vologda stage with two homegrown Russian country-bluegrass bands: St. Petersburg's veteran *Fine Street* and Obninsk's brand new *Cheerful Diligence*. Incidentally, the very first bluegrass band to come out of Obninsk – *Bering Strait* – gained a cult following in the U.S. and was nominated for a Grammy country music award in 2003. So if you want to come hear what the musical fuss is all about, please join us on the grounds of the Vologda Kremlin for the first ever Russian Bluegrass Festival and you will get a chance to hear some heart-felt music from a magical place where the grass is blue not green.



*Vologda's beautiful Kremlin*